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ABSTRACT

John Dewey is known as the greatest and the most representative of U.S. philosophers. His philosophy, influenced by and developed during a period of great expansion in U.S. history, and great upheaval in U.S. social life, is characterized by a common sense, extroverted pragmatism. Sigmund Freud, in a ironic twist of fate, has been an important source for a reaffirmation of the inner life, of the importance of personal selfhood in a mass society. The philosophical bases of Freudian psychology, along with a variety of psychoanalytic therapies, have provided the extroverted with just what is missing in Dewey himself, namely a substitute for religious conceptions of the person, or in the case of religious humanism, a comfortably pragmatic approach to mainstream religion. Dewey and Freud, along with B. F. Skinner, in fact represent the three major bases or preconceptions of U.S. social thought today. They are enduring influential figures collectively known as humanists among their admirers and secular humanists among their severe critics. Dewey and Freud also represent a severe schism in Western thought. Dewey's modern human is a pragmatic and sociable optimist whose activist attitude toward problem solving remains highly attractive in all nations and cultures undergoing industrialization and technological advancement. Freud's human, in contrast, knows there is a severe psychic price to pay for uprooting the human being from traditional patterns of family and community life. This paper considers the major differences that divided Freud and Dewey. Contains 10 references. (Author/DK)

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DEWEY AND FREUD

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John Dewey is rightly known as the greatest and the most representative of American philosophers. His philosophy, influenced by and developed during a period of great expansion in American history and great upheaval in American social life, is characterized by a common-sense, extroverted pragmatism.

Sigmund Freud, in an ironic but not too surprising twist of fate, has been an important source, for Americans, for a reaffirmation of the inner life, of the importance of personal selfhood in a mass society. The philosophical bases of Freudian psychology, along with a variety of psychoanalytic therapies, have provided extroverted Americans with just what is missing in Dewey himself, namely a substitute for religious conceptions of the person or, in the case of religious humanism, a comfortably pragmatic approach to mainstream religion.

Dewey and Freud, along with B.F. Skinner, in fact represent the three major bases or preconceptions of American social thought today; they are enduring influential figures collectively known as humanists among their admirers and secular humanists among their severe critics of the fundamentalist and political right. Standing in the background, of course, are others, such as Hegel, Marx, and Darwin, each in his own way pointing toward a positivist and evolutionary optimum for Western Civilization and, with typical Western chauvinism, for humanity as a whole.

On the other hand, Dewey and Freud also represent a severe schism in Western thought. Dewey's modern man is a pragmatic and sociable optimist whose activist attitude toward problem-solving remains highly attractive in all nations and cultures undergoing industrialization and technological advancement. Freud's man or woman, in contrast, knows there is a severe psychic price to pay for uprooting the human being from his or her traditional patterns of family and community life. With this continuing dilemma in mind, we will now turn to a consideration of the major differences that divided these two great men, which still trouble us in our

professional and personal lives today.

Although they were historical contemporaries, Dewey and Freud never met and never directly referred to one another's works. Dewey's reservations, expressed in his own restrained and objectified style, were directed at psychoanalytical practice and the metaphysical conclusions drawn by many psychoanalysts, including Freud himself. He was especially critical of the manner in which Neo-Freudians operated on the assumption that human beings were possessed of primordial instincts, not subject to scientific analysis and modification.

As Gordon Allport (1939) points out in The Philosophy of John Dewey, a change occurred in Dewey's thought between 1917 and 1922, so that by that time in his development ". . . he decided to dispense with instincts" (p. 270).

What Allport means is that Dewey grew increasingly dissatisfied with what he perceived as the reification of the concept of the subconscious mind among Freud and his followers. This, in turn, had led the Freudians into a series of false dualisms, such as life instinct vs. death instinct, constructive vs. destructive behavior, and so forth.

Dewey (1930) himself expresses his doubts about the directions being taken by the Freudians in this passage from Human Nature and Conduct:

> So the most popular forms of clinical psychology, those associated with the founders of psychoanalysis, retain the notion of a separate psychic realm or force . . . and so in effect talk about unconscious consciousness. They get their truths mixed up in theory with the false psychology of original individual consciousness. (p. 86)

In his earlier thought, Dewey had left the idea of original instincts undefined, although he had grown increasingly unhappy with his own neglect of the concept (Levitt, 1971). By 1922, as illustrated in the statement above, he had

decided to move beyond any residual implications of the reification of consciousness.

As Dewey (1925) later expressed it in Experience and Nature, an inaccessible, reified concept of mind (or of instinct) perpetuated a mischievous discontinuity:

> The objection to dualism is not just that it is dualism, but that it forces upon us antithetical, non-convertible principles of formulation and interpretation. If there is a complete split in nature and experience, then of course no ingenuity can explain it away; it must be accepted. But in case no such sharp division exists actually, the evils in supposing there is one are not confined to philosophic theory. (p. 221)

Even though Freud and his psychoanalytic allies postulated a continuity between man and nature and indeed shared with Dewey the conception of the human being as a bio-social organism, their emphasis on the subconscious, pre-cognitive aspects of the human mind struck him as absolutizing the irrational. Freud (1933) seems to confirm Dewey's suspicions in a later work, A New Series of Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, in which he speaks of those aspects of the human psyche which, in our present state of knowledge, at least, are immutable:

> The theory of the instincts is, as it were, our mythology. The instincts are mythic beings, superb in their indefiniteness. In our work, we cannot for a moment overlook them, and yet we are never certain that we are seeing them clearly. (p. 131)

Freud does not mean to lapse into pre-scientific terminology; he is resorting to poetic language to indicate the fact that there are still great unknowns existing deep within the human mind. This remains the case today, even though psychoanalytic techniques are able to retrieve much useful information from the subconscious.

Dewey (1943), in contrast, continued to emphasize the necessarily social and public aspects of all human experience, if that experience was to possess any significant value. While not denying the physiological and developmental bases for what others might call instincts and intrinsic satisfactions of the self, he refused to confer upon these basic human drives the status of values. In an article appearing as a response to a critic of his thought in The Journal of Philosophy, he stated that ". . . the mere enunciation that something, as a matter of fact, is enjoyed or liked is not a judgment of the value of what is enjoyed" (p. 312).

As Lionel Trilling (1950) points out in The Liberal Imagination, Freudian man has "a kind of hell within him from which rise everlasting the impulses which threaten his civilization" (p. 57). For Dewey, these Freudian conceptions are mere speculations and unsubstantiated inferences.

In the same work, Trilling points out that reality for Dewey is "taken" rather than "given" (p. 57). The speculation that there exists a tragic battleground of the soul, whether expressed in Freudian or in traditional religious terms, is a "given," which Dewey rejects in favor of a concept of human experience as "taken." We take our being in and through the world of objective reality.

Dewey's philosophy seems highly appropriate at the political level of human activity, especially among educated middle classes with an established tradition of representative government and public debate over controversial issues. At the psychological level, however, it neglects at its own peril our deeper human longings and strivings. Democracy itself will not be sustainable, in the West or elsewhere, if its practitioners ignore the human condition.

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